25 years of obsessive perfection at NIAR

BY ROY WENZL
The Wichita Eagle

Walter Lee awoke one night from what many of us would call a coma. It was 10 years ago. At the moment consciousness returned, he found himself alone. In the dark.

"I realized, after a while, that everybody, the whole aircraft hangar, had gone home and turned off the lights."

Lee runs a calibrations lab for the National Institute for Aviation Research, which this past week marked 25 years of testing aircraft components obsessively to keep airplanes safely airborne worldwide.

Lee and other engineers marked the anniversary by talking about the oddness on which much of Wichita's importance is based.

Engineers are obsessive, compulsive, odd. Modern Wichita is a city and a people founded in large part by oddballs.

Lee says his calibrations require a focus so acute that he goes sometimes into a state almost spiritual. Like Alice in Wonderland, or Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds, he goes somewhere without going anywhere. His coma took place at a previous job, at a Lockheed Aircraft plant in Fort Worth. He was working on calibrations in a huge hangar where F-16 fighter planes were being manufactured.

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HAVE A JOKE? SEND IT TO US

How many engineers does it take to change a light bulb?
Hey, you tell us! Got any good engineer jokes or funny stories in this town full of engineers? Send them to us at jokes@wichitaeagle.com. We'll run the best of them on Kansas.com.

John Laffen is director of three laboratories at the National Institute for Aviation Research at Wichita State University, including the crash test lab.
Spouses say engineers don't speak English even if English is their primary language. At dinner conversations they use acronym slang (LES = left eardrum strength), PVT (pervious tissue), or even UNC (uncontrolled compression, a compression test done on a piece of material that has no holes in it). OHC, on the other hand, means "open hole compression." Just FYI.

"Walker thought we did not need to go to a therapist because they decided what was wrong," she said.

"By that time, we had spent years not understanding what we were saying to each other." A therapist taught them both to write down and use different words.

"They've been married 22 years," she said. "Jackson wouldn't even talk to me about his job. He said, 'When you're dealing with metrology issues, you wear a special suit and it's right there on your right hand in small white letters.'"

She almost lost it

"It is so hard and so scary to become an engineer that nearly all engineers collect in separate circles," she said.

"I think that was it," she said. "It was a very important moment."

Walker left her job, drove to Mid-Continent Airport, and flew to Paris. She sat in her car.

"The plane looked so beautiful."

"Then she drove home."

"She went back to engineering."

"After they gave up on blowing up things in the microwave room, the engineers thought to mark the anniversary by loading sacks of pop corn in the microwave room on a massively engineered and designed pop corn machine."

And (film it, maybe even in slow motion).

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